

**Simon Mercieca – Joseph Muscat**

### *A Territory of Grace: Lampedusa during Early Modern Times*

**O**n the facade of a monastic church owned by the Discalced Carmelites at Cospicua, one of the cities overlooking the Grand Harbour of Malta, lies a statue of a Madonna with the infant Jesus in her arms. It is sculptured in the classical iconography associated with the Madonna, very common in the Catholic world. This work would have passed unnoticed were it not for the fact that this statue, though old, is a replica of another very famous statue; that of Our Lady of Trapani. However, despite its history hardly anyone in Cospicua knows the connection between the Madonna of Trapani and their hometown, or its relevance to the history of the central Mediterranean in Early Modern times.

The original statue, in white marble, is venerated in the Sanctuary of the Annunciation in the city of Trapani in Sicily. Hence the name Madonna of Trapani. This type of iconography, showing the Virgin Mary with the infant Jesus in her arms visually conveys the Christian message that Mary is the maternal divine figure that leads good Catholics to Christ.

Like Cospicua, the sanctuary in Trapani is also run by Carmelite monks, who fall within the same category of the Discalced Carmelites, with the difference being that the latter was a break-away reform group guided by the spiritual visions of a woman Doctor of the Church, St. Theresa of Avila. One might think that the presence of such a statue on the facade of a Discalced Carmelite church in Cospicua, could be associated with the fraternal link that tied the Discalced Carmelites to their brothers. However, this devotion to our Lady of Trapani has much deeper roots. It is linked with maritime trade and the Knights of St. John.

The reason for placing such a statue on the facade of the church is to be associated with the devotion that the Knights of St John bore towards Our Lady of Trapani.<sup>1</sup> This particular devotion was due to the fact that Trapani was one of the most important ports of call in Sicily for the fleet of the Order of St. John. Yet, there was another reason for such particular devotion, and this was the building of a small chapel dedicated to this Madonna on the deserted island of Lampedusa. Lampedusa became a Marian sanctuary further encouraging devotion among many Christian seafarers. The name of the Madonna of Trapani had pride of place in the maritime vocabulary of the Knights. It formed part of their maritime code of reconnaissance for day signals on the galleys of the Order.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> N(ational) L(ibrary) M(alta), A(rchives) O(f) M(alta), 1771, f. 107v.

<sup>2</sup> NLM, Libr(ary Manuscript) 110, f. 13, no. 52.

Devotion to the Madonna of Trapani began to spread in Malta in the early seventeenth century. The first manifestation of this particular devotion was noted at Żabbar, a small village on the doorstep of the harbour cities where a church dedicated to this Madonna was built in 1612. In 1645, another small church was dedicated to Our Lady of Trapani in the distant village of Siggiewi. At the same time, an altar was set up at the parish church of Qormi while a marble copy of the Madonna of Trapani was placed on the main altar of the rural chapel in Gudja dedicated to Our Lady of Loreto.<sup>3</sup> In the meantime, side altars were created in a number of churches to encourage the devotion to the Madonna under this name.

In Valletta, at the Augustine Friars's church, Giovanni Haxixa and his wife built an altar to the Madonna of Trapani in 1634.<sup>4</sup> On their part, the Augustinian Friars had a vested interest in spreading this devotion in Malta. During Early Modern Times, their presence at Trapani was extremely strong and their convent there had originally belonged to the Knights Templar. After the suppression of this Order, it became the property of the Knights of St. John and later, it was turned into an Augustinian convent,<sup>5</sup> leading to the diffusion of this cult among the Augustinian Friars in Malta too.<sup>6</sup> Devotion to this particular Madonna was also being promoted in Valletta by the Carmelite Friars who, like the Augustinians, built a convent in this new city. Normally, it was a rule among monastic orders not to spread the same popular devotion within the same parochial precincts. In Valletta the Madonna of Trapani was an exception. Even female orders, such as the Convent of St. Catherine,<sup>7</sup> and the now defunct nunnery of the penitents, dedicated to St. Mary Magdalene, promoted this cult.<sup>8</sup> The latter was a charitable institution popularly known in Valletta as La Camarata, which originally was a convent for girls, mostly offspring of sailors. It was closed in the nineteenth century when the building made way for a large residential block. At the Camarata too, there was an altar dedicated to the Virgin of Trapani, whose *pala d'altare* has survived the challenges of time.<sup>9</sup> Incidentally, the Augustinian Church, the Church of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, the Convent of St. Catherine and the Camerata were all situated within the same parochial boundary known in Valletta as Porto Salvo. Most of the above churches had a direct connection with the Knights: in the

---

<sup>3</sup> Vincent BORG: *Marian Devotions in Malta*, IN: *Marian Devotions in the Islands of Saint Paul (1600-1800)*, ed. Vincent BORG, The Malta Historical Society, 1983. 200-202.

<sup>4</sup> Archive of the Monastery of St. Augustine Friars, Valletta, *Inventario del Convento S. Agostino a.1634*.

<sup>5</sup> P. Bonaventura ATTARDI: *Il Monachismo in Sicilia discifrato dell'Ordine del P.S. Agostino*, Antonio Gramignani, 1741. 159.

<sup>6</sup> Mark CAUCHI OSA: *L-Istorja tal-knisja ta' S.Wistin tal-Belt*, 1997. 127.

<sup>7</sup> Gorg, AQUILINA: *Is-Sorijiet Gerosolimitani il-Knisja u l-Monasteru ta' Sant'Ursola Valletta*, P.E.G. Malta, 2004. 191.

<sup>8</sup> George Percy BADGER: *Description of Malta and Gozo*, Malta, 1858. 211.

<sup>9</sup> AQUILINA (2004): 191.

case of the Church of Loreto in Gudja, the Convent of the Camarata and St. Catherine, these were all directly established by the Knights. Even, the church of the Discalced Carmelites, as we will be explaining, has a direct link with the Knights of St. John.

The origins of the statue of the Madonna in Trapani are not known because many of the old documents were destroyed when Trapani was struck by the plague in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. However, some of the surviving documents show that the devotion goes back, at least, to the middle of the twelfth century.<sup>10</sup> The church in Trapani was given to the Carmelite friars on 24 August 1250 by the senate of the same city. Incidentally, the Carmelites are the only Mendicant Order enjoying a Mediterranean origin, having originated on Mount Carmel in Palestine before eventually moving westwards.<sup>11</sup>

Based on tradition, different stories survive about the origins of the statue. Some of these traditions are extremely old and go back to Early Modern Times (1500-1798). One such story is to be found in a book published in Venice in 1623 by Don Felice Astolfi, Canonico del Salvatore. His work, dedicated to the history of the worship of the Virgin Mary, is entitled *Historia universale delle Immagini miracolose della Gran Madre di Dio riverite in tutte le parti del Mondo*. Trapani is included in his book and attests to the importance of this devotion at the time. According to Astolfi, this statue was sculpted in Cyprus in the year 730, later ending up in Jerusalem and came into the possession of the Knights Templar. In order to prevent the statue from falling in the hands of the Saracens, some Crusaders removed it from Jerusalem and set sail for Pisa. On their journey, the ship met rough seas and, in peril of being shipwrecked, found refuge in the bay of Lampedusa. Eventually, the captain continued his journey entering the port of Trapani where, by way of thanksgiving, he donated the effigy to the city.<sup>12</sup>

There are a number of variations to this story, which we are not going to discuss as they are beyond the purpose of this study. What is of interest however is that similar and parallel stories about statues of the Virgin, which were donated to churches by seafarers after experiencing harsh weather conditions, intersperse the entire history of the Mediterranean. In Malta, there is at least one version about the origins of a processional statue of the Madonna, whose arrival in the seventeenth century is attributed to the adverse calamities of nature.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> BORG (1983): 200.

<sup>11</sup> Adelaide CIVELLO: „La Madonna di Trapani, Culto e Immagine nella Sardegna del XVI-XVII-XVIII Secolo”, *El món urbà a la Corona d'Aragó del 1137 als decrets de nova planta VIII*, Congrés d'història de la Corona d'Aragó 17 Barcelone / Poblet / Lleida, Volume 2. 81. 2003.

<sup>12</sup> Giovanni FRAGAPANE: *Lampedusa dalla preistoria al 1878*, Sellerio editore Palermo, 1993. 508.

<sup>13</sup> Simon MERCEICA: ‘The Religious Cults of Thaumaturgical Powers and the Devotion towards St. Nicholas of Bari in Malta’, *Symposia Melitensia*, University of Malta, Junior College, Number

The origins of the Madonna of Trapani are retold, in a book by Abate Gio Battista Pacichelli, entitled *Memorie de viaggi per l'Europa christiana scritte à diversi in occasione de' suoi ministeri*, published in Naples, at the Royal Press, in 1685, wherein, in the fourth part of the second volume, Astolfi's story is retold.<sup>14</sup> Even Pascal Maria D'Avezac refers to this narrative in his *Histoire et description de tous les Peuples. Iles de l'Afrique*, published in 1848. In discussing Lampedusa, D'Avezac added that „the image of the Madonna of Trapani that used to be venerated on this island, received gifts and candles from both Christians and Muslims alike.”<sup>15</sup>

The origins of the devotion to Our Lady of Trapani on the island of Lampedusa seem to have led to the expansion of this cult in Malta rather than in Sicily, which was home to this miraculous statue. Giovanni Fragapane published archival documents from Malta in his monumental work about Lampedusa. The protagonist of his historical narrative were the owners of this Island, the Tommasi family and the Knights of Saint John. Fragapane's proposed narrative fits very well within the paradigm proposed by Claude Levi-Strauss when introducing the concept of vehicle and tenor in semiotics. The vehicle conveyed the underlying idea, providing the content. The tenor equates with the subject.<sup>16</sup> The Knights of St. John were the vehicle behind such devotion but the persons who maintained this devotion alive on this island were merchants, erratic Christian mystics and distraught Christian and Muslim seafarers. Metaphorically, they were the tenor of this whole devotion.

According to an interesting study conducted by Lucia Siddi, a similar story of devotion towards Our Lady of Trapani seems to have existed in Sardinia, as well as in different regions of Spain and at the Balearic Islands.<sup>17</sup> Unfortunately, Siddi does not delve into the question of the origins of this cult and whether its diffusion was in any way connected to the Order of Saint John or whether it reached Sardinia directly from the city of Trapani or through the island of Lampedusa. She is more inclined to link it to the commercial connection that existed between merchants from the city of Cagliari who were to be found trading at Trapani.<sup>18</sup> Despite such a long standing trading tradition, this devoutness in Sardinia only started in

---

6, Malta, 2010. 31.

<sup>14</sup> Gio Batta PACICHELLI: *Memorie de viaggi per l'Europa christiana scritte à diversi in occasione de' suoi ministeri*, Naples, 1685.

<sup>15</sup> *L'Univers Pittoresque histoire et description de tous les Peuples de leurs religions moeurs Coutume Industria*, Didot Frères, 1848. 108.

<sup>16</sup> Claude LEVI-STRAUSS: *Totemism*, Beacon Press, 1963.

<sup>17</sup> Lucia SIDI: „Le Copie della Madonna di Trapani in Sardegna”, *El món urbà a la Corona d'Aragó del 1137 als decrets de nova planta VIII*, Congrès d'història de la Corona d'Aragó 17 Barcelone / Poblet / Lleida, Volume 2, 2003. 421.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, 422.

the seventeenth century, becoming extremely popular in Cagliari during the eighteenth century where, according to Adelaide Civello, the Madonna the Trapani was acclaimed as „*patron of seafarers and fishermen*”.<sup>19</sup>

The documentary sources at the National Library of Malta indicate that the Knights of St. John began to show personal interest in the island of Lampedusa in the seventeenth century. Such an interest intensified during the eighteenth century after worship of the Virgin reached unprecedented importance with the conversion of a Muslim slave, who was sentenced to death for being implicated in the conspiracy of the slaves against Grand Master Manuel Pinto da Fonseca (1741-1773) in 1749. On the eve of his execution, the slave asked to be baptized claiming that his conversion was prompted by the miraculous appearance of the Virgin Mary of Trapani. Despite being executed, the slave did not attempt to renegade his newly acquired faith, thus raising commotion among the Knights who began believing in his conversion was sincere. This resulted in a popular outcry of a status of saintliness to this slave.<sup>20</sup>

The deserted island of Lampedusa began to appear as an ideal location for demographic experiments. A century had gone by since demographic theories had been presented in Europe particularly by John Graunt (1620-1674), William Petty (1623-1687) and Edmond Halley (1656-1742) amongst others. The diffusion of their work began to have an influence on the development of population policies and Lampedusa began to appear, from the eighteenth century onwards, as an ideal place for population diversification. The island had extensive and untapped natural resources, which could sustain a small colony of workers. Experiments, supported in particular by successive French Consuls in Malta, were undertaken to entice Maltese farm labourers to establish themselves on the island. Such migration policies found the support of some erratic French friars. Similar attempts were undertaken later on, as for example, by setting up a colony on the island of Corsica, whose history has been studied by Antoine-Laurent Serpentine. Unfortunately, both experiments failed abysmally.<sup>21</sup> Without *salva condotti*, the safety of the residents of Lampedusa was not guaranteed. In 1667 the Tommasi family of Palermo became owner of the island with the elder son acquiring the title of Prince of Lampedusa. But beyond these aristocratic honours, the Tommasi family was not in a position to obtain the required passports. They sought to use French

---

<sup>19</sup> CIVELLO (2003): 84

<sup>20</sup> NLM Libr. 250, No. 9, *Relazione della Prodigiosa Conversione d'un Maomettano, fatta per mezzo dell'apparizione della SS. Vergine di Trapani l'anno 1749.*

<sup>21</sup> Antoine-Laurent SERPENTINI : „*Un projet d'implantation coloniale maltaise en Corse dans le deuxième moitié du XVIII siècle*”. IN: Simon MERIECA (ed.): *Mediterranean Seascapes Proceedings of an International Conference held in Malta in conjunction with the Euromed Heritage II Navigation du Savoir Project*, Malta University Publishers Ltd., 1006, Valletta, 2004. 275 -287.

Consular services, in particular the vice-consul in Palermo, but all attempts failed. Palermo had only a vice-consul and the consul himself resided at Messina who, in turn, depended on the French ambassador in Rome. But most important, the interests of the Tommasi family happened to differ from the French. While they sought French help to obtain the *salva condotti*, at the same time, they were unsure of their true intentions. They covertly feared that too much French interest would result in the family losing the island to France. The Tommasi family was in a quandary.

The Tommasi dynasty sought to play one French consular officer against the other. They entered into correspondence with both the French Consulate representative in Sicily as well as the Consular office in Malta. The French Consuls in Malta had an important say in procuring these *salva condotti* for whoever wanted to go and live on Lampedusa. The successive heirs of Lampedusa were reticent towards introducing French and Maltese labour hands, which meant that the entire enterprise was destined to fail. What resulted from this experiment was the strengthening of devotion to Our Lady of Trapani on the island and, in turn, such veneration turned Lampedusa into a territory of grace.

The presence of trees on Lampedusa attracted Maltese sailors who collected wood and brushwood which were much in demand in Malta. It was during this phase that the Marian devotion blossomed in Lampedusa. An image of the Virgin in the form of an icon attracted the devotion of many sailors. Initially, the image was a painted one, probably on wood. It was believed, especially among Muslim sailors, that the island had an aura of sanctity due to the fact that the tomb of a Muslim holy man or *marabut* was positioned in the same cave, where the sculptural image of Our Lady of Trapani was to be found. This cave was located a couple of metres away from the only bay in Lampedusa. At a devotional level, the introduction of worship of Our Lady of Trapani brought about the building of a small chapel in front of the cave or rather the cave was closed by the construction of a facade in the form of a church,<sup>22</sup> attracting respect from both Muslims and Christians sailors. Indeed, according to Vincenzo Coronelli, the place of worship was divided into two sections; one for Christians and the other for Turks who happened to visit on pilgrimage offering substantial amounts of money; each one according to his rites and for the purpose of his faith<sup>23</sup>

According to Fragapane, the devotion of the Virgin Mary at this cave pre-dates the Knights as in the early seventeenth century, the stone statue replaced a much more older icon of the Madonna, when the original icon was taken to Liguria.<sup>24</sup> Again, always according to Fragapane, this new

---

<sup>22</sup> FRAGAPANE (1993): 338.

<sup>23</sup> Coronelli Vincenzo, Franciscan monk, cartographer publisher and encyclopaedist 1650-1718.

<sup>24</sup> FRAGAPANE (1993): 510.

statue made in the image of Our Lady of Trapani was paid for by the Maltese merchant, Mario Il Vato.<sup>25</sup>

Ġużi Gatt, a Maltese researcher, states that at the beginning of the eighteenth century there was a hermit living in the cave known as Father Clement, who was assisted by another Maltese by the name of Giovanni Paolo Sammut serving as sexton.<sup>26</sup> Consular letters confirm that Fra Clement, of French origin, moved to Lampedusa from Malta to safeguard the interests of successive French consuls in Malta regarding the future of this Sicilian Island.

Muslims and Christians began to leave offerings in the cave, including food, for hungry sailors who might have accidentally ended up shipwrecked on the island. The fact that the Christians set up this small chapel in the same cave, dedicating it to the Virgin Mary without desecrating the Muslim tomb, earned the respect of Muslim corsairs, with whom the Christian West was in a perennial state of war. At the same time, the Christian West was well acquainted with the devotion Muslims bore towards Mary, who, like Catholics, refer to Her as Virgin, or Miriam al Batoul. Christians were well aware of the references to the Virgin in the Qurân where a whole chapter or '*Sûra*' is dedicated to her; the only '*Sûra*' dedicated to a woman. References to the life of the Virgin Mary are again to be found in another book known as '*Qisas al-anbija*' (or Stories of the Prophet) and in the '*Ĥadîth*', which are a collection of stories about the Prophet Mohammad.<sup>27</sup>

Strange as it may be, there are more references to the Virgin Mary in the Islamic tradition than in the four Gospels put together.<sup>28</sup> Perhaps, the strong diffusion of the cult of the Virgin Mary throughout the Christian Mediterranean during Early Modern Times was also done in view of this Islamic tradition.

Most chapels built close to the coast in the Christian world were dedicated to the Virgin Mary in what may be anthropologically interpreted as an attempt to instil some form of mutual respect in a world torn apart by strife and warfare. Indeed, it was on the island of Lampedusa that the devotion to the Virgin Mary reached its epitome bringing about what in English is defined, „a

---

<sup>25</sup> FRAGAPANE (1993): 116.

<sup>26</sup> G. GATT: '*Serq mill-Knisja ta' Lampedusa*', Il-Malti, March 1934. 21-22.

<sup>27</sup> Francis X. CASSAR: '*Marija Mnissla bla tebġha*', *Annales Celebrationum in Honorem Deiparae Immaculatae Conceptionis Civitatis Cospicuae Festa 2012*, Malta, 2012. 47-53.

<sup>28</sup> The Knights of St. John were knowledgeable about Muslim devotion to the Virgin Mary, in particular the respect that the prophet Mohammad reserved for the Virgin in the Qurân. This is clearly stated in a loquacious *relatione* or report written by a Knight to commemorate the above-mentioned episode of the miraculous apparition of Our Lady of Lampedusa to a Muslim slave. NLM Misc. 250, *Relazione della Prodigiosa Conversione d'un Maomettano, fatta per mezzo dell'apparizione della SS. Vergine di Trapani*, l'anno 1749, Imp. Abb. Fardella, 1790.

territory of grace" or „land of peace" in an area riddled by conflict.

This was not the sole incident where a hermit living on a desert island in the Mediterranean attracted the respect of corsairs from opposing factions. Other stories are recounted, at different stages of Mediterranean history, of erratic hermits, such as *San Kerrew*, who seems to have lived in Malta or Gozo during the High Middle Ages 1000-1300. He is another example, in the long history of the Mediterranean, of wondering hermits seeking a space of grace in the Mediterranean. The small troglodyte „chapel" on the island of Filfa, a few kilometres away to the south of Malta, must have served a similar purpose.<sup>29</sup>

Furthermore, Christians and Muslims alike used the bay in Lampedusa for emergency repairs to their boats damaged in storms. Perhaps, the most famous incident occurred in 1552, when the Christian armada, sent by Emperor Charles V to attack Tunisia, was caught in a storm and Admiral Andrea Doria took refuge in the bay in order to carry out repairs. Like Doria, the Knights of St. John often needed to find shelter for their galleys. They too were accustomed to leaving food in the cave as offerings always bearing in mind the plight of distressed seafarers. Most of these minutiae escaped the chronicles of history but sometimes we do come across other references in our archives. For example, the *galera padrona* entered the waters close to Portofarina but got caught in a storm and had to seek safe haven at Lampedusa to carry out necessary repairs.<sup>30</sup>

The gradual increase in the number of Christian and Muslim sailors as well as slaves began to make ex-voto offerings to the Madonna attracting the attention of the French priest, Pierre Dan. Dan refers to the offerings made by many slaves to Our Lady of Trapani, in particular as thanksgiving for their safe journey back home.<sup>31</sup>

At the turn of the eighteenth century, Thomas Salmon began to publish a series of books in English which were in turn translated into Dutch, French, German and Italian. The Italian edition was entitled *Lo stato presente di tutti i paesi e popoli del mondo naturale, politico, e morale con nuove osservazioni, e correzioni degli antichi, e moderni viaggiatori*. The first Italian edition appeared in 1732. It was a success and another edition was published between 1740 and 1762. In volume 24, the author records an ex-voto made to the Madonna of Trapani in the form of «piccola barca fatta di cuojo con somma industria ed artificio» (*a small boat fashioned with craft and ingenuity from leather*).<sup>32</sup> Such reference

---

<sup>29</sup> Anthony MANGIO: „Il-Kwadru Trittiku tal-Madonna ta' Filfla: Bejn Storja u Tradizzjoni", Programm Festa Santa Katarina V.M. Zurrieq, Mill-Hadd 26 t'Awissu sal-Hadd 2 ta' Settembru 2012. 9.

<sup>30</sup> NLM Libr. 480, f. 237.

<sup>31</sup> Pierre DAN: *Histoire de Barbarie et de ses Corsairs*, Chez Pierre Rocolet, Seconde Edition, Paris, 1636. 420.

<sup>32</sup> Popoli del Mondo, Vol. XXIV, 29.



confirms Dan's story that it was customary amongst freed Christian slaves to donate a boat as a token of thanksgiving to the Virgin for their safe delivery home.<sup>33</sup>

Another story which confirms such a custom is related to the capture of an Ottoman galleon by the galleys of the Knights of St. John in 1644. The number of seamen on board a galley was restricted and therefore any captured vessel had to be ferried by an emergency crew, known as a „boarding party”. The seized Turkish galleon was boarded by such a crew, which was sufficient to enable the vessel to set sail to Malta. However, on its journey the crew met with adverse weather conditions and ended adrift. The situation became so dangerous that, at 140 miles above Capo Spartivento in Calabria, it was decided to abandon ship and the crew sought a safe-passage to the nearest land on the galleon's kayak. The boarding party vowed to donate the kayak on which they were fleeing to the first church of the Madonna they would find on reaching the shore.<sup>34</sup>

Within this category fall many marine graffiti found on the walls of churches and convents, especially those dedicated to the Madonna, which definitely were made by sailors as thanksgiving. Today, most of the gifts donated to the Virgin Mary in the distant past are lost. What remains are only the most precious ones because of their intrinsic financial value.

Yet, the chimera of Lampedusa as a safe haven was relative. The surrounding waters were invaded by corsairs from both religions. While the island church was a territory of grace, the surrounding sea was one of the most dangerous for navigation in the central Mediterranean. Maritime documents attest that whenever galleys of the Order of St John were sailing close by the guns were fully loaded or as the Italian saying goes „*con arme in coperta*”.<sup>35</sup> The same behaviourism prevailed among Muslim corsairs. Deference was reserved only for those who were shipwrecked in the area or saintly hermits taking care of the Madonna's chapel.

Such a surreal atmosphere began to attract the attention of a number of writers to the extent that most of the eighteenth century and the early nineteenth century descriptions of Lampedusa contain references to this unique form of mutual co-existence between two Mediterranean religions very much at loggerheads at the time. This is substantiated by Arcangiolo Leanti who was particularly taken in by the carisma shown by Muslims vis-à-vis Our Lady of Trapani in Lampedusa:

«... but its best ornament (Lampedusa) is the miraculous statue of the Virgin Mary, which is very similar to that which is really angelical, venerated in the city of

---

<sup>33</sup> NLM Misc. 250. *Relazione Della Prodigiosa Conversione d'un Maomettano, fatta per mezzo dell'apparizione dell SS. Vergine di Trapani l'anno 1749.* Imp. Abb. Fardella, 1750.

<sup>34</sup> Arch 1759, f. 225v.

<sup>35</sup> AOM 1768, f. 277.

*Trapani, and of which it is said that before arriving at the said city, a fierce storm transported it to this island; this holy image, which is of the height of six palms, is located in a natural cave in the form of a chapel, away from the beach 300 steps, and receives offerings from seafarers who happen to be sailing in the surrounding area, whether Christians or infidels. This image continuously performs two amazing wonders, that is, the lamp remains always lit up before the holy altar, until someone comes arrives to fill it with oil, and in addition, anybody who dares to steal from the many gifts that are left in the chapel, is held on the island by storm or other injury. These gifts are left not only by the Christians but also by the Muslims, who come to give praise as can be attested by the various Turkish coins that can be found in this sacred place».*<sup>36</sup>

More information about the devotion towards the Madonna of Trapani in Lampedusa is given by Salmon, in the book *Popoli del Mondo*. After a geographical introduction, which is similar to that given by Leanti, Salmon adds more information regarding the connection of the Knights of St. John with the island of Lampedusa.

*«But what is most noteworthy on this Island, is the cave-like chapel, formed by nature, distant only from the sea a few hundred yards, wherein is placed a miraculous image of the Virgin, similar to the one kept in City of Trapani. The said image is venerated with particular devotion especially by sailors, both Christian and Muslims, who shelter (at its harbour) and leave their offerings. Two singular wonders are related to this image: the first one is that the lamp keeps burning in front (of the image), until a new arrival comes to fill it with oil; the other (story) is that anybody who takes away any of the offerings will be held on the island without being able to leave. But whatever the truth of the first, it is said that the knights of Malta come from time to time to take many of these gifts, left by the devotees, and then transport to Malta or to Trapani, at their Hospital of Annunciation for the upkeep of poor and the sick.»*<sup>37</sup>

---

<sup>36</sup> ... ma il suo migliore ornamento (Lampedusa) e' il prodigioso simulacro di Maria Vergine, molto simile a quello veramente Angelico, che si venera nella citta' di Trapani, e di cui dicesi, che prima di arrivare alla medesima, sia stato da fiera lui burrasca trasportato in quest'isola ; la qual sacra Immagine, ch'è dell'altezza di palmi sei, sta collocata in una grotta in forma di cappella dalla natura, lontana dalla spiaggia 300 passi, e riscuote gli ossequi di navigatori, che quivi tragettano, cristiani siano essi, o infideli, operando ella di continuo due strepitose maraviglie, cioè che resti sempre accesa la lampada, che arde dinanzi al sacro altare, finche non arrivi altro passeggiare a somministrarvi dell'olio, e che in oltre arrestato venga da tempesta o da altro infortunio, colui che ardisce di rubar qualche offerta delle molte, che nella cappelletta si trovano, lasciatevi non sol da Cattolici, ma ben anche da Maomettani, i quali vengano a prestarle omaggio, come dinotano varie monete turchesche che si ritrovano in quel sacro luogo. Arcangiolo Leanti, *Lo Stato presente della Sicilia*, Vol. 2, Palermo, 1766. 400.

<sup>37</sup> Ma quel che v'ha di più osservabile in quest' Isola, si e' una Grotta a guisa di Cappella, formata dalla natura, lontana dal mare alcune centinaia di passi, in cui sta riposta una miracolosa immagine della Vergine, simile a quella che conservare nella Citta' di Trapani. La medesima e' con particolar divozione venerata dai naviganti, che qui vi approdano, tanto Christiani come Maomettani, che vi lasciano le loro offerte. Due singolari meraviglie riferite vengono da quest'immagine; l'una che stia sempre accesa la lampada che le arde dinanzi, fin che non arrivi un altro passeggero a somministrarvi dell'olio; e l'altra che trattenuto venga senza poter partire chiunque togliesse alcuna delle mentovate

Like Salmon, the Venetian writer, Vincenzo Coronelli, also showed particular interest in this surreal world on Lampedusa. When, discussing the yearly collection of the gifts left at Lampedusa's church by the Knights of Malta, he refers to the fear prevailing at the time, especially among Ottoman sailors, regarding this place. It was believed that it had been overrun by the spirits who would persecute anybody with endless nights without sleep who dared to steal any of the offerings left for the Madonna in this cave. Coronelli discredits the idea that the island was haunted and considered the story of the phantoms as unfounded and without any scientific basis. However, at the same time he reaffirms that many, including Muslims, expressly visited the island and left donations for the Madonna. Impertinently, Coronelli declares that if this story were true, the first to be persecuted would be the Knights of Malta who daringly, once a year, got to take these gifts away.<sup>38</sup>

Documents of the period speak about the great care observed to collect these gifts. Once a year, precisely at the end of the sailing season, one of the galleys of the Order would approach the island. A special selected squad was dispatched to the cave to collect the money and other gifts left there for the Madonna. Guards ensured that none of the members of the squad stole anything.<sup>39</sup> The collected items were given to charitable institutions to assist those in need. There was no appointed receiver. Part of the money went to the Sanctuary of the Madonna of Trapani in Sicily and the rest went to the charitable institutions among which, according to Coronelli, was the *Sacra Infermeria* as the hospital of the Knights of St. John in Valletta was called.<sup>40</sup>

The veracity of Salmon and Coronelli's reports are confirmed by a *Diario di Bordo* (log book) of one of the galleys of the Order. The log book takes us back to the year 1706 when the squadron of the galleys of the Order had to take refuge in Lampedusa. The crew was in great difficulty because it

---

*offerte ma comunque sia dalla verita' della prima, dicesi che i cavallieri di Malta vengon di quando in quando a prendere i numerosi presenti, lasciati dai devoti che poi trasportano a Malta, oppure a Trapani, al loro Ospitale della Nunciata per mantenimento dei poveri e dei malati. Popoli del Mondo, vol. 24. 104, 105.*

<sup>38</sup> CORONELLI, 111. „Ma nel tempo presente altra struttura di fabbrici non vi scopra che una chiesa demoninata S. Maria di Lampedosa divisa in due parti, l'una per i Cristiani e l'altra per i Turchi, che capitano cola in pellegrinaggio ed offeriscono somme rilevanti ; ogni uno secondo il rito, e fine della propria Religione. Scrittori pure degni di fede asseriscono, che niuno puo soggiornare in quest' isola per i fantasmi, spettri ed orribili visioni, ch'in tempo di notte vi appariscono, frastornando il riposo, e la quiete le formidabili apparazioni, e sogni spaventosi, che fatalmente affliggono con terrori di morti quelli, che ardiscono fermarvi la spazio d'una sola volta. I Turchi sono ibevuti d'una ridicola superstizione, cioe, che niuno possa uscire dall'Isola, che non vi lascia qualche cosa, ovvero che avesse ardire di trasportare la minima bagatella. Ma le fede depurata de' Cavalieri di Malta non e cosi leggiera, e vana, imperoche ogni anno approdano colle galee, e raccolgono le offerte fatte alla mentovata Chiesa per trasferirle a Malta ed impiegarle a sollevo dell'Ospedale degli'infermi” .

<sup>39</sup> AOM 1771, f. 107v.

<sup>40</sup> L'Univers, 109.

lacked additional provisions of food. Still, the sailors did not dare resort to stealing any of the supplies left at the church. They could not even resort to rabbit hunting because they did not have enough ammunition. Thankfully, a Maltese corsair had also taken refuge at Lampedusa after having captured a vessel off the Barbary Coast and was able to supply them with the victuals and gunpowder material they desperately needed. Reciprocating the gesture, the galleys gave the required minimum number of sailors in order that the Maltese corsair could continue his return trip to Malta with his prey, a corbie of Tripoli. This incident was considered a miracle. The seafarers returned home shortly afterwards. The galley squadron left on 30th October reaching Malta the following day in time to dismantle the galley masts at the port known as De la Galere (i.e. at the entrance to Cospicua) where the boats could shelter during the rainy winter months.

The devotion towards Our Lady of Trapani did not escape the ship's captain, whereby after referring to what he considered a miraculous assistance, he mentions the veneration towards the Madonna of Trapani in this small troglodyte chapel on the island of Lampedusa:

*«On this island there is a chapel dedicated to the Virgin which is half cave and half constructed and is maintained by the gifts that are left by Christian ships which seek shelter there. Sometimes there is a hermit and at other times there are two on guard. They are fed out of the charity given to them by the Turks. These gifts are offered to them on condition that they (the hermits) keep a lamp lit day and night on the tomb of Mohammed which is situated in this cave next to the chapel. The Turks give charity both for the upkeep of this tomb and place».*<sup>41</sup>

It is of particular interest that the church of the Discalced Theresian Friars in Cospicua is intrinsically linked to this corsairing activity of the Knights. It is situated in a secluded spot within the harbour cities where the members of the Order used to go for their spiritual retreat. One of the corsairs, Alonso de Contreras, who was also given the habit of the Order for his exploits at sea, admits that it was within the massive walls of the monastic convents that these warriors found peace of mind. Maritime graffiti are mostly situated on the wall of the corridor that from the monastery leads to the Knights' retreat quarters. Some of the Knights fell in love with the austere life-style of these friars, whose monastic life was based on strict poverty that they asked to be buried inside the church or in the chancery beneath the church.

Thus, the statue of Our Lady of Trapani on the facade of the church of

---

<sup>41</sup> *A cette Isle il ya une chapelle dediée a la Vierge qui est moitié grotte et moitié fabrique entretenue par les charités que les batimonto (sic.) Chretiens y font lorsquils y mouillent. Il ya quelque fois qu'un hermite quelques fois il sont deux qui la gardent et ce nourrissent des charités des Turcs les y souffrent a condition qu'ils y tiendront nuit et jour une lampe allumée a un tombeau de Mohammed qui est dans une grotte aupres de la Chapelle, et font aussi leurs charités pour cet entretien et soit pour ce tombeau. NLM 262, 25, au port de Lampedusa.*

the Discalced Carmelites is a living attestation to the old bond that existed between the Knights of St. John, their sailors and these pious friars who lived in the shelter of one of the harbour quays. From its vantage position, in a niche on the facade, the statue was an omen of good wishes for a safe voyage for local sailors and Knights.

It is of interest to note that the statue of Our Lady of Trapani was the first statue in Sicily to be solemnly crowned following a decree by the Vatican Chapter in 1734. This meant that an apostolic delegate was sent purposely from Rome to preside over the crowning. The ceremony took place on 14 March 1734. This tradition of crowning statues and painting of the Virgin reached the Maltese islands more than a century later and among the first Madonna's in Malta to be officially crowned by Vatican Chapter was the *pala d'altare* of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, venerated at the Carmelite church in Valletta in 1881. The next Madonna to be officially crowned by the Vatican was the main altarpiece at the parish church of Cospicua in 1905, dedicated to the Immaculate Conception. Sixteen years later, it was the turn of the statue of Our Lady of Victories in Senglea. Incidentally, the statue of the Madonna of Trapani on the facade of the Discalced Carmelite Friars in Cospicua is shown with a crown over her head and a smaller crown over the head of the infant Jesus, which could signify that it was produced after 1734.

No doubt, this statue of the Madonna of Trapani with the infant Jesus in her arms offered an ideal model for many statues of the Madonna that began to be produced in Malta for processional purposes. Furthermore, it certainly cannot be disputed that the model for this representation of the Madonna derived from the classical idiom of the Greek statues of antiquity. Through these types of representations, the Catholic Church wanted to impart the metaphor that a Christian could make it to Jesus through Mary. This same allegory is present in one of the antique statues, that of the sculptor Kephisodotos, who lived between 375 and 370 BC. He portrayed Eirene (the Greek word meaning Peace) carrying Ploutus meaning wealth.<sup>42</sup> Is there a connection between the meaning of this statue and the one imparted through the Madonna of Trapani? Was it just a coincidence that seventeenth and eighteenth century writers spoke about the Greek origins of this statue or did they have in mind this type of classical representation of the figure of a mother and child in Greek antiquity?

Above all, the importance of this statue on the facade of the church of the Discalced Carmelite friars increased in time since, meanwhile, the statue of the Madonna of Trapani on the island of Lampedusa disappeared. In the

---

<sup>42</sup> L-istatwa originali ta' Kephisodotos intilfet. Li baqa' kopja jew kopji taghha. Din hija kopja Rumana li tinsab Munich, Antikensammlung. Ara Gisela M.A. RICHER: *A Handbook of Greek Art*, Phaidon Press, London, 1998. 141.

early nineteenth century, fresh attempts were undertaken to get Maltese migrant workers to start a new colony on Lampedusa. This venture was in the hands of two families of Maltese origin: the Gatts and Frendos who in the meantime had moved to Sicily to obtain better terms from the Prince of Lampedusa, Giulio III. Simultaneously, members of the Tommasi family took up residence in Cospicua.<sup>43</sup>

At first the recruitment of workers went smoothly. Even their settlement on Lampedusa progressed well especially when the enterprise was being run by Salvatore Gatt. The agrarian production and husbandry was rendering large profits. As thanksgiving, Salvatore Gatt even restored and embellished the small church of the Madonna.<sup>44</sup> On the death of Gatt, the business was taken over by his son-in-law, Salvatore Frendo. It was at this point that things began to go wrong. The children of Salvatore Frendo were not capable of continuing in the footsteps of their father or grand-father, nor did they show any business acumen. Instead, infighting broke out, while their discord affected the workers, mostly Maltese, who were experiencing desperate times. But above all, the Frendos did not show any sense of devotion to the island's religious heritage, and perhaps, moved by the new spirit of iconoclasm spirited by the Enlightenment movement, the chapel was desecrated and the statue of the Madonna was beheaded.<sup>45</sup>

The ill-omen mentioned by several eighteenth century writers concerning all those who do not respect this Madonna came into being. Those responsible for this sacrilegious act ended up bankrupt. The King of Naples could not permit such lawlessness to reign in Lampedusa any longer and decided to intervene by taking full control of the island. The Frendos were expelled. Bankrupt and with a number of criminal charges hanging over their heads, including that of murder<sup>46</sup>, they could not return to Malta or move to Sicily but found refuge in Sfax in Tunisia.<sup>47</sup>

If in Lampedusa the devotion to Our Lady of Trapani experienced such turbulent times, in Malta too, it continued to spread in the early decades of the nineteenth century until it came to an abrupt end after the 1820s. The real reason why such a cult did not remain popular anymore is perhaps linked to the political developments of the early nineteenth century. Slowly sea transportation became less and less dependent on sail, and the Knights of St. John were no longer in possession of Malta while corsairing ceased to be one of the main activities in the Mediterranean. As these political developments were unfolding, it was natural that Lampedusa's role as a

---

<sup>43</sup> Notarial Archives Valetta, Register 431, f. 341v. A member of the Tomasi family is recorded as living in Cospicua in a notarial deed drawn up in 1748.

<sup>44</sup> FRAGAPANE (1993): 337, 347.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, 492.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, 492.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 413.

territory of grace came to an end. So too would the veneration of our Lady of Trapani swiftly dwindle in Malta.

Perhaps, one of the last public manifestations of devotion to Our Lady of Trapani is an ex-voto given to one of Malta's rural churches dedicated to the Virgin Mary, and known as Tal-Hlas, at Qormi by passengers on a Maltese *balanza* (which was a type of boat with sails) were attacked by Calabrian brigands near the island of Stromboli in 1815.

The arrival of Napoleon in Malta in 1798 and the subsequent take-over of the Island by the British in 1800 brought all corsairing activity to an abrupt end. Muslims were no longer the enemy of the Maltese. Yet, as the ex-voto above clearly indicates, corsairing had not been totally eradicated in the Mediterranean. The end of the corsairing period coincided with the attempts of Calabrian „Christian” brigands to reinvent themselves as sea pirates attacking any vessel transporting booty. The Maltese *balanza* was flying the Union Jack and despite the settlement of Vienna, sporadic acts of piracy continued. No doubt in the minds of some of these passengers, the Madonna of Trapani, was still associated with the corsairing world, when she represented a safe haven and this explains why she was invoked together with two other saints, one of whom was St. Rosalie and the other, the Virgin Mary and the souls of the purgatory.<sup>48</sup> Incidentally, the later iconography is found associated but not exclusively with that of Our Lady of Mount Carmel. The invocation of Our Lady of Trapani with other Madonnas of different titles or saints is common. In Sardinia, a surviving ex-voto dedicated to Our Lady of Trapani has in fact a dual invocation: It also shows Our Lady of Mount Carmel.<sup>49</sup>

Slowly, the cult of the Madonna of Trapani lost its pride of place in terms of popular devotion. It was replaced by new devotions to the Virgin, with the result that old images began to be removed from the interior of our churches and stored away in private chapels or corridors of the convents as in the case of the *pala d'altare* of Our Lady of Trapani at the Church of the Augustinian fathers in Valletta. It was removed and hung up on one of the walls of the adjacent convent. The painting that stood at the Camerata was donated to the monastery of the nuns of St. Ursola also in Valletta.<sup>50</sup> Another artistic statue of Our Lady of Trapani which was intended for popular devotion amongst the elite, today adorns the rich artistic collection of the Wignacourt Museum at Rabat, Malta.<sup>51</sup>

Nowadays the Catholic cult of the Virgin Mary is under attack in a

---

<sup>48</sup> Joseph Muscat, *Il-Kwadri Ex-Voto Marittimi Maltin*, Malta, 2003, 172.

<sup>49</sup> CIVELLO (2003): 84.

<sup>50</sup> Gorg, AQUILINA: *Is-Sorijiet Ġerosolimitani il-Knisja u l-Monasteru ta' Sant'Ursola Valletta*, P.E.G. Malta, 2004.191.

<sup>51</sup> According to the curator of the Wignacourt Museum, John Azzopardi, this statue belonged to the collection of the notary Catania, who bequeathed his art collection to the said museum.

number of theological spheres, in particular, from those who derive their inspiration from the Protestant views of Christian theology. Yet, it is highly symptomatic that such an attack and criticism is mostly confined to geographical areas, such as North and Central Europe which, until recently, were not in direct contact or in confrontation with Islam. In the south, the influence of the Orient and the contact with Islam worked in a different direction. The cult towards this woman created a territory of grace. Perhaps, this could be an added reason why sanctuaries in the Catholic Church, are historically (at first, they were exclusively) dedicated to the Virgin Mary.

Perhaps, it is within this hidden theological perception that one can begin to understand why chapels and small churches were built around the coasts, serving as a maritime signal, at a time when living in such areas was extremely dangerous. These chapels are again, in their majority, dedicated to the Virgin Mary. The story of the small church in Lampedusa and its devotion was undoubtedly one example, among many others, that pepper the history of the Mediterranean from the Late Middle Ages through the Early Modern Times.